

VZCZCXRO6471
RR RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #1119 2891711
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 151711Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6494
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2888
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 9056
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0715
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2530
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7383
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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1732
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3545
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS ALGIERS 001119

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EDU](#) [FR](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: TO JOIN OR NOT TO JOIN: ALGERIA'S FRANCOPHONE
DILEMMA

¶1. (SBU) Despite the lack of an official announcement by the Algerian government, MFA contacts tell us that President Bouteflika will attend and give a speech at the twelfth Summit of Heads of State of the International Organization of Francophone Countries (OIF). The summit, to be held from October 17-19 in Quebec City, will be a stop on the President's visit to the province, during which he will also celebrate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city. Never a member and only recently a quasi-observer, Algeria has long been leery of the OIF, given its Arabization campaign dating back to the 1970s. Bouteflika's comments at the summit may indicate whether Algeria intends to finally embrace the organization, and in doing so, formally accept the francophone identity Algeria has struggled for decades to escape.

¶2. (U) With approximately 25 million French speakers, Algeria is the second most populous francophone nation in the world after France. Since independence, however, Algeria has rejected offers to join the OIF or benefit from its assistance programs. In one of his speeches, President Boumediene went so far as to refer to the organization as "a retailer of neo-colonialism." Still, other national leaders have been more open about possible cooperation with the organization. Former Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali once stated that "the francophony should be considered a framework and a forum for dialogue."

¶3. (SBU) During his presidency, Bouteflika appears to have sought a policy of cautious rapprochement with the OIF. At the behest and persistence of former French President Jacques Chirac, Bouteflika attended the 2002 and 2004 summits as an observer. He did not attend in 2006 and the current French President does not appear to be putting the same pressure on Bouteflika to participate.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: Given that Algeria is still governed by the same generation that fought in the war of independence, the idea of joining the OIF is likely not a popular one within the government. Nonetheless, Algeria has engaged with the French government to improve the instruction of the French language in public schools and membership in the OIF would come with a significant assistance program including scholarships and teacher training. At the 2002 summit, Bouteflika declared that "French is an asset, not a threat", but given that Algeria remains conflicted about such a symbolic gesture, no one except Bouteflika knows what he will say next week in Quebec.

PEARCE